

THE ENGLISH THOREAU.

THE STORY OF JEFFERIES'S SAD LIFE.
THE EULOGY OF RICHARD JEFFERIES. By Walter Besant. With a portrait. 12mo., pp. 384. Longmans, Green & Co.

Mr. Besant wrote this memoir from pure love and admiration of Richard Jefferies's writings. He had no personal acquaintance with its subject, whom he had never seen, but he knew a friend of Jefferies, and from this friend he had obtained a good deal of rather intimate information. It follows that the biography is wanting in that element of familiarity which always lends so distinctive a charm to works of the kind written by such as have known and lived near the individual whose career is to be chronicled. But in all other respects Mr. Besant has shown himself eminently qualified for the task, and if sympathy can make up for remoteness of relationship, there is enough in this volume to justify the title. Yet the admiring biographer is too conscientious to mislead the reader, and profit against temptation to idealize his hero, he presents his life so candidly as to leave no ground for suspicion of blind panegyric. He has written a book which is full of interest.

Richard Jefferies was a remarkable, almost a unique character, and had he learned his own bent and limitations earlier, or had he lived longer, his literary work would not have been of even higher importance than it is. The story of his life is in many respects not uncommon, but it is none the less tragic, and the story of his last years is sad and profoundly impressive.

The son of a Wiltshire yeoman of somewhat eccentric character and old stock, Jefferies early manifested a strong love for nature. He was always inclined to be reserved and to like solitude, and these traits never left him. He became a passionate devourer of books, rather than a student; in fact, he had no regular education, but found out many things for himself, having access to a good library. His bent was toward literature from early youth. His first work was that of reporter on a country newspaper. This he liked because it kept him much in the open air. All his youth was, however, practically spent in making observations upon external life. He knew the country on radius of ten miles around Coate House, his father's farm, just as Thoreau knew the river on whose banks he lived and died. Woods and downs, fields and hedge-rows, coppices and hillocks, brooks and ponds, with all their creatures, furred and feathered and scaled, were familiar to him. In this world of nature only was he thoroughly at home. He did not know it from the point of view of the scientific naturalist. He was not a botanist, or a collector of butterflies or of anything else. He never yearned to wrest Nature's secret from her by pulling her creatures to pieces and putting them under the microscope. He was content to observe them, to study the habits of plant and tree and vine and bird and insect and reptile and animal; to lie on the green turf and watch the squirrels above him and the rabbits below; to lie in wait in Ashbourne Chase for the lordly stag often, and to feed his soul with the grace and beauty of that natural monarch of the ferny glades; to note the ways of the bird in the air and the serpent on the rock; to drink in the balmy air and the bright sunshine and the life and activity everywhere about him. This was the pleasure of Richard Jefferies, and the realm in which he attained almost unsurpassed knowledge and insight.

Mr. Besant compares him to Thoreau, and the kinship is too plain to be disengaged or questioned; but it is not so clear that Jefferies was the one English writer of his kind whose work will live—and this, too, the very enthusiastic biographer does not hesitate to assert. There were great kings before Agamemnon, and there were great naturalists before Richard Jefferies. White and Jesse and Waterton and Buckland are each and all delightful writers and full of sympathy, and there is no present reason to doubt that their fame is established firmly. It is possible that for beauty of literary style Jefferies deserves to be put before them all. At his best he is in some respects unsurpassed. But he is a most uneven writer, as Mr. Besant unconsciously shows by the frequent citations which he gives. Like many young men, Jefferies was long in finding his vocation. His desire was to become a novelist. He had no qualifications for the work. He knew nothing of the world, of society, of human motives, passions, tendencies, save what he had gathered from books. But also like many other young men, he thought he was completely equipped, and he proceeded to waste the best years of his short life in composing bad novels. He could not conceive character nor construct plots. He could describe nature, and the only good passages in his stories are bits of such description. He went to London, missed a fine opportunity by neglecting to avail himself of an opening made by a telling letter to "The Times" on "The Wiltshire Peasant"; had a very hard struggle for bread; subsisted on a little newspaper work and occasional articles accepted by the magazines; and not until eight years of futile experiment had disciplined him did he recognize where his strength really lay. Then he wrote those books upon which his fame will rest and in which he stands so nearly alone, as the illustrator and interpreter of a world of nature for the most part as far from the common ken as the central wilds of Africa. In those books—"The Gamekeeper at Home," "The Amateur Poacher," "Wild Life in a Southern Country," "Wood Magic," "Red Deer," and "Round About a Great Estate," together with "Life of the Fields" and parts of "After London," and "Amazons at the Fair"—he appeared in his best form, for he was in his own domain, and instead of inventing, he was teaching.

In this memoir Mr. Besant has quoted largely from Jefferies, and has represented his style and manner quite sufficiently. His observation was curiously minute; so much so that some dull souls could not endure him, but called his most delicate and faithful elaboration "cataloguing." He could sit down under a tree and in five minutes see enough interesting life and motion and growth around him to fill pages with the account of it. Nor is there any technicality in his nature-pictures. They are instant with poetic feeling. They breathe the spirit of the woods and fields. As one reads them the scented summer breezes seem to blow, the boughs to move, the birds to sing, while through the mobile, leafy fretwork the sunbeams flock the green grass with their dancing light-pattern, and the warm air is filled with the hum of insects. Perhaps the most splendid of all his writings is "The Pageant of Summer." It is a poem, beautiful exceedingly, only the keenest enjoyment and appreciation of Nature—and it was written in the bitter agony of a wasting and mortal disease. This is the final tragedy of Jefferies's life. Just when he had attained recognition and fame, when fortune seemed for the first time to smile upon him, he was stricken down with a complaint of the most painful nature. At first the surgeon's knife was resorted to, and four times in one year he underwent operations. Then the first disease was succeeded by a second, which kept him for five years in almost unreleaved torment, and finally killed him. During the greater part of this period he was unable to sleep. He wrote to a friend: "I was seized by a mysterious wasting disease, accompanied by much pain. I gradually wasted away to mere bones. By degrees this pain increased until it became almost insupportable. I can compare it to nothing but the flame of a small spirit-lamp continually burning within me. Sometimes it seemed like a rat-always gnaw, gnaw, night and day. I had no sleep. Everything I ate or drank seemed to add fuel to the flame." The pain went on, burn, burn, burn. If I write a volume I could not describe it, the terrible scouring pain, night and day. There is nothing in medical books like it, the pain that follows corrosive sublimate, which burns the tissues. It was at times so maddening that I dreaded to go a few miles alone by rail lest I should throw myself out of the window of the carriage. I worked and wrote all the time, and

some of my best work was done in this intense agony."

It is difficult to realize such a fact as this, and most difficult with the work itself in evidence. Is that there is no remnant suggestion of any disturbing element, of any emotion on the part of the writer not wholly in sympathy with the Nature he describes so brilliantly. But the poor fellow was dying while he thus resolutely kept his mind at work and thrust the physical agony out of sight. He was poor, he had a wife and two children, he was proud, and he was dying under torture. Surely human misery can hardly go beyond this. His friends helped him, much against his will, and only when his indomitable will could no longer make head against the advance of his complaint. His last words to his wife were "Darling, good-by. God bless you and the children and save you all from such great pain." He was only thirty-eight when the end came, and at the threshold of his career. Yet he had already written works which will keep his memory green. Mr. Besant has done his work well. He has written a biography which draws us to the interpreter of his life, and excites at once our admiration for his rare gifts and pity for the misfortune and the dreadful suffering which made his life so tragic.

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